



CHAYAT HASHAVUA: ELEPHANT

CAN ANYONE TEACH US THE HEBREW NAME FOR AN ELEPHANT?

- The rabbis called the elephant *piel* (פִּילְ).
- The Rabbis of two thousand years ago taught that the word *piel* is related to the word *pela'im* (פְּלָאִים), meaning “wonders,” from the root letters פְּלָא, which mean to be extraordinary or wonderful.
- The Rabbis saw the elephant as one of God’s wondrous creations, so they saw *pela'im*, or wonders, in the *piel*.

ELEPHANTS ONCE INHABITED THE LAND OF CANAAN, WHICH BECAME ISRAEL, BUT THEY ARE NOT MENTIONED DIRECTLY IN THE BIBLE.

- The Bible does mention the ivory tusks of elephants that were brought for King Solomon. (I Kings 10:22, II Chronicles 9:21)
- Solomon made his throne from the ivory.
- Elephants were brought back into the land of Israel by the Syrian-Greek army a little more than 2,000 years ago.
- They were used in the Syrian-Greek war against the Jewish people.
- In the first Syrian-Greek campaign against the Jews, they used 32 elephants to spearhead 20,000 men on horses and 100,000 foot soldiers.
- Can anyone teach us the name of our festival that celebrates the victory of the Jews in this war?
- Can anyone teach us how this war started? (A company of Greek soldiers arrived at the village of Mattathias the priest. The soldiers had orders to force the Jews to obey the king's order that they sacrifice to idols. As Mattathias was highly respected by the villagers, he was ordered first to begin making the sacrifices to the Greek gods. When he refused, another Jew started to make the sacrifices. Mattathias then attacked and killed both that Jew and the Greek officer, and together with his sons and a number of Jews who wanted to fight against the Syrian-Greeks, they went into hiding in the desert and mountains.)
- Can anyone teach us why one of Mattathias' sons, Judah the Maccabee, became a great general in this war? (He invented guerrilla warfare—to avoid direct attack and, instead, ambush the enemy forces from hidden positions—to lead the Jews to several victories over much larger Syrian-Greek armies.)

IT'S TIME FOR THE ELEPHANT QUIZ!

- How many species of elephants do you think have lived on earth? (Over the past 40 million years, more than 600 species of elephants have roamed the earth.)
- How many species of elephants do you think live on earth today? (Today only two species are alive—the African elephant and the Asian elephant.)
- Can anyone teach us why so many elephant species became extinct? (Climate fluctuations over the millennia and resulting vegetation changes caused the extinction of many elephant species, but human impact has also taken its toll.)
- At the turn of the 20th century, elephants numbered from 5 million to 10 million, but hunting and destruction of their habitat reduced their numbers, so how many do you think are left? (An estimated 640,000 in the year 2000.)

THE RABBIS OF OLD WERE SOMETIMES ACCUSED OF DOING WONDROUS THINGS WITH ELEPHANTS.

- People who disagreed with the Rabbis said that, because the Rabbis were so well educated and intelligent, they could make an elephant pass through the eye of a needle.
- Can anyone teach us what it means to make an elephant “pass through the eye of a needle”? (The Rabbis were so sharp they could prove anything with their arguments, even things that were obviously impossible.)



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